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HOW SHALL WE TEACH THE INFANCY STORIES TO OUR CHILDREN?

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Certain facts in the religious world of today give timeliness and importance to this question, though the same facts make it difficult to give a thoroughly satisfactory answer.

1. First among these facts is the existence of a state of comparative uncertainty as to the historical character of these parts of the gospel narrative. *Comparative* uncertainty, I say; for some who would not hesitate to avow their belief in the historical accuracy of these stories, yet would acknowledge that their belief in the historical character of the remainder of the gospel narrative is more secure. And many who hold that these stories are historically and literally true do so on dogmatic rather than on critical grounds. Perhaps it is not too much to say that scholars generally hold that the historical credibility of the infancy stories is not so firmly established as is the rest of the gospel narrative.

Many evidences might readily be given, if needed, to show the existence of this state of comparative uncertainty. An interesting symposium was published in the *Biblical World* for September, 1905, in which one of the matters under discussion was the virgin-birth of Jesus Christ. It was interesting and enlightening to note the difference of opinion there developed. One writer says plainly: "The virgin-birth of Jesus is not only scriptural, but it is the only view that meets all the demands of the delicate situation on rational grounds." Immediately following is this statement from another contributor: "I regard it as important that Christian faith should disengage itself completely from the birth histories of Matthew and Luke." Here are two scholars of undoubted Christian faith, taking opposite positions. When we examine Professor Sanday's admirable article on "Jesus Christ" in the *Hastings Bible Dictionary*, we find that he begins the story of the life of Jesus with his active ministry,

taking up the infancy stories later in the discussion. While Professor Sanday defends the historical reliability of these stories with great reasonableness and persuasiveness, still the fact that he reserves the discussion of them until he has closed his study of the life of Christ shows that they are subject to a comparative doubt as to their historical character.

Now, it may be that most of the readers of the *Biblical World* heartily believe in the historical character of these stories. Some of them may feel absolutely confident that critical investigation will vindicate their right to be taken as history; others may believe them on dogmatic grounds. But whatever our individual convictions or beliefs, the fact remains that these stories are not yet established historically as is the rest of the gospel narrative. And those who hold to their historical credibility on dogmatic grounds need to be reminded that more than once in the history of doctrine, beliefs and interpretations which have been insisted on as vital to Christian faith have been afterward given up as a result of further historical or critical study, and the faith has not suffered in the least. What we take to be pillars on which the structure rests may prove to be mere parts of the scaffolding left in position, which can be removed without weakening the structure; with no result, in fact, but to leave more room, and greater freedom of entrance.

2. Another factor in the problem is that our work, as teachers of children, is to prepare them for the conditions of thought-life that will exist tomorrow. They are to meet the problems of the religious and theological world farther on, not now. We need to train them to meet what is likely to confront them when their time comes for forming their own faith. Our concern must be to give them that view of any matter which has the largest probability of permanence, the least possibility of being vitally affected by the progress of critical and historical investigation. We must give them as little as possible that they may have to unload later; as much as possible that will surely have permanent value. Above all, we must see to it that in our teaching we do not present as vitally related to the Christian faith, that which later investigation may show to be untrue, or true in a sense different from that in which it was learned by the child.

3. A third factor in the problem—and a very serious one—is

the present attitude of the child-mind toward religion, especially toward the supernatural. The training children receive every school-day makes it less and less easy for them to accept the miraculous as credible. It has been well said that the children of today are taught for twenty-five hours a week that nature is invariable and that miracles do not happen, and then are taught for twenty-five minutes a week that the world is based on miracle. We must remember that, in a proportion steadily increasing, the children who come to be taught in our Sunday schools are feeling a diminishing influence of home training. That means that scientific tests assume a greater importance to them than they assumed to the generation past, and that the miraculous is harder for them to accept. We certainly have not taken into account sufficiently this present attitude of the child toward fundamental questions as to the relation of nature and the supernatural. He will not believe in miracles unless he be shown that they are necessary and evidenced.

I have in mind especially those in adolescent years, with whom the problem becomes most serious. With very young children the matter is much more simple. But the difficult stage arrives with children from twelve years to sixteen or eighteen. A few years ago I had an interesting experience with a Sunday-school class of boys, most of whom were in the early years of the high school. They were keenly interested in the study of the Bible, but they had a spirit almost hostile to the miraculous whenever it appeared. And their Sunday-school teacher complained, with some justice I thought, that the International Lessons just then seemed built on the principle of thrusting forward the miraculous as positively and baldly as possible. One boy in the class, from a Christian home, a Christian himself by every practical test, refused even to consider the matter of church-membership because his mind revolted at the miraculous element in certain parts of the Bible. I learned afterward that the place where he stumbled most painfully was over the virgin-birth of Jesus. Some of us may deplore this rationalistic attitude of the child-mind today, and others may welcome it as a prophecy of better things to come; but whatever our view of it, we must acknowledge its presence. And the fact that it exists makes it very necessary that we deal with extreme care with any miraculous elements as to which

there is even comparative uncertainty. It is of the greatest importance that we win such minds to faith in the supernatural; but to do that we must not make prominent those elements in the Bible narrative which are not most surely established as historical.

What, then, should be our aim and method? I can give no complete answer. I can only indicate certain principles which should govern our teaching of these children when we come to the infancy stories.

The first principle is that we should never raise critical questions or doubts in the minds of children. Childhood has enough perplexities and mental burdens of its own. It is worse than unwise, it is wicked, to load it with any of the burdens of maturity. We must not bring young minds too soon into the critical atmosphere. Here, more than anywhere else, the rule must apply that we take to our classes—not processes, but results. We must teach what is sure to our minds, not what is in doubt. While our aim should be to prepare the child to meet rightly the critical questions when they arise in his experience, we must not introduce him to them too early. President Stanley Hall has spoken wise words as to the right spirit for the educator of the young in chap. 12 of *Adolescence*. It would be well if every teacher of children would read that chapter, especially the words on pp. 149 ff. and 229–31 of Vol. II. How forceful is his statement: “If there is a sin against the Holy Ghost, it is dishonoring one’s own or another’s youth!”

On the other hand, we must be equally careful not to lay dogmatic foundations which later thought and study may upset. Whatever may be in doubt, there are surely enough elements of the Christian faith which are and always will be unquestioned, to provide us material ample for the building we do in the minds of our pupils. Let us be careful not to lay as foundation-stones anything which later investigation may show to be untrustworthy, or at any rate not fit for a foundation-stone.

Perhaps the most subtle danger to which the religious teacher is exposed, in a time of theological uncertainty, is the danger of thinking that, when in doubt, it is always safe to teach the old truth in the old way. “When in doubt, go back,” is a motto too often followed, possibly because it invites us to travel the easiest path. The teacher

who, in dealing with questions still in debate, insists on the old truth set in the old light, works havoc no less than he who insists prematurely on the new truth or the new light. Skeptics are made by both courses. But the most painful cases of the overthrow of faith come where the mind has received in youth the impression that the very validity of religion is involved in the truth of matters which are still in doubt from the point of view of historical and critical investigation. Such minds, when later years lead them to where they doubt the facts so positively taught, are too apt to doubt also the great truths lying below the facts. A wiser way must be found. We need to remember the warning of the Master—possibly the most solemn warning he ever gave: “Whosoever shall cause to stumble one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he drowned in the depths of the sea.”

But we must by no means so teach these stories that they shall appear as untrue, or become to the child mere myths and fairy-tales. It is possible that the progress of critical investigation will tend to establish their right to be taught as history. And, in any event, there lie within them truths of great value, beautifully set, and peculiarly adapted to the child-mind. Who that has seen a group of children listening, as someone possessed with the story-teller’s gift has related the tale of the shepherds and the angel-song, could fail to see that it would be an irreparable loss if these stories should become to the children only fairy-tales or legends?

How, then, shall we present them? To put the answer in a single phrase, I would say: Lay stress on the ideal rather than on the formal elements in these stories. Within each of these infancy stories lies a great and beautiful truth. Each of them possesses a distinct spiritual value. Now, whatever may result from further critical inquiry and discussion, whatever may be finally affirmed or denied as to their historical validity, these underlying truths will always remain. And these are what count in the use made of these stories. Let us remember that far-reaching word: “The things which are seen are temporal; the things which are not seen are eternal;” and let us lay stress most of all on the spiritual elements of these stories, not on the physical facts of their setting.

At the risk of repeating my thought, I would insert here a word

of caution: We must not present these stories as allegories or myths. We must not so tell them that the children will get an impression that they are untrue. No; unless one has come to a positive conviction that these stories are unhistorical (and if one has come to that position, perhaps he should not teach these stories to children just now), let him tell the stories straightforwardly, as he would tell any other part of the gospel narrative, only taking special pains to emphasize the ideal elements in them. Perhaps one might do well to present them as stories which were told about Jesus after his death, when people began to realize his greatness, and tried to understand better what his world-mission was and how he began it. But let the teacher be careful all through to lay the heavier stress on the truths rather than on the facts. Then, whatever the results of critical study may prove to be, there will be necessary in the mind of the youth no radical readjustment, no violent removal from what was thought to be a solid foundation of fact. Let us aim to lay a foundation of truths rather than of historical facts; for they will surely last.

To make clear the course suggested, take these stories, one by one, and see which are the ideal and lasting elements, and which the physical and uncertain. In the story of the virgin-birth the fact is that Jesus was born of a virgin; the truth underlying it is the unique relation of Jesus to God; his being the chosen of God, the Son of God; his coming into the world's life, not by accident, nor by a mere outworking of natural forces, but by a distinct step, and that the greatest one, in the self-revelation of our Father.

In the stories of the angel-visit to Zacharias, the birth of John the Baptist, the testimony of Simeon and Anna, and, to some extent, the annunciation to Mary, is set forth the great truth that the revelation of God in his Son came first to a select few, who were watching, praying, longing, for the fulfilment of God's promises; and that they were able to see the new light far earlier than the mass of the people, because they were in closer touch with the spirit of God.

In the tale of the wise men and the star is the beautiful setting of the great truth that longing for new light was widespread, reaching into other lands than Palestine; that not only the chosen people, but the world at large, was ready in the providence of God for the coming of his Christ.

In the story that the children love most of all, that of the angels and their song to the shepherds, is set forth the truth that the spiritual world, the home of God, rejoiced at the birth of the world's Savior; and that the meaning of that birth, its mission of "peace and goodwill," was clear to the divine wisdom and love from the beginning. The life of Jesus, even in its first moments, was divinely chosen and planned. These are the universal elements that underlie these stories, and give them most of their real value for us today.

Now, I believe it is possible for anyone who will think carefully over this, and pray earnestly, to find a way to tell these stories without rousing doubts as to the facts, yet always holding the facts subordinate to the truths in them; then, whatever further light may reveal as to the credibility of the facts, the stories will retain their main value to the mind of the one who so learned them in childhood.

The part of the infancy narrative about which feeling is most acute and sensitive is, of course, the story of the virgin-birth. Like the other stories of the infancy, this is involved in the "comparative uncertainty" of which I have spoken. But beyond this, there are other reasons peculiar to it which make our treatment of it a delicate matter when we deal with children. A few words should be given to this. My answer to the question how we should teach this story to children is a very frank and positive one. I think we should ignore the subject wholly or very largely. I am decidedly of this opinion for the following reasons:

1. Such a course is in harmony with the nature and needs of the child. Questions relating to sex must not be prematurely thrust upon the child's consciousness. To make much of the fact of the virgin-birth is to emphasize a part of life of which the young child is rightly unconscious. There is a growing tendency to teach the child the facts of sex earlier and more directly than has been the custom. But this should be done with extreme care; and until it has been done, stress should not be laid on the story of the virgin-birth of Jesus.

2. To ignore this matter is in harmony with what we know of Mary's treatment of the subject. It is certain that few, if any, knew the story of the birth of Jesus till after his death. The gospel says that "Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart."

Especially important is her word to the boy Jesus, as recorded in Luke 2:48: "Behold thy father and I sought thee sorrowing." She does not hesitate to speak of Joseph as Jesus' father. The fact that the only incident we have from the boyhood of Jesus shows us his mother ignoring the fact of the virgin-birth, and that too in the very gospel-narrative which has most to say of this fact, surely warrants us in adopting the same attitude when talking with children about the early years of our Master's life.

3. This course is in harmony with the actual history of the growth of faith in the first disciples. There is not a trace anywhere in the gospel narrative that any one of the Twelve, or any of the personal followers of Jesus, ever had heard about the virgin-birth till long after they became his disciples. Why should we make important, and even fundamental, a matter which had no place in their development until they were far on in their Christian life? Is not the natural course for us to take that which was followed by the first disciples, who were set face to face with Jesus the Man, the Teacher to learn from, the Master to follow; and who learned, as they lived with him, to recognize in him the Christ, and the Son of God? Let us set him before the children, and let him call them "by his own glory and virtue." Then, if, in after-years, the doctrine of the virgin-birth seems essential to their full faith in him, they will be as ready to accept it as the early church was. Such is the natural order of faith's development. The very stronghold of the faith in the absolute deity of Jesus is surely in the gospel according to John and certain of Paul's letters. Yet in John's writings and in Paul's there is not a trace of the doctrine of the virgin-birth. In order to insist on the absolute deity of Jesus, must we insist on a doctrine or fact which John ignores when he writes his prologue? Should we not rather make most of the argument he uses there: "And we beheld his glory, as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"?

4. This course of ignoring, largely or wholly, the virgin-birth is in harmony with the right sense of the values of life. I mean this, that it emphasizes the moral and affectional side of life rather than the physical, as the real basis of life, and of the home. If we teach the child (as I was taught in my youth) that "Joseph was not the real father of Jesus," that he is a sort of outsider in the infancy narra-

tive, we emphasize the physical basis of home-life disproportionately, almost painfully. One solid foundation we should certainly seek to lay in the child's mind is that the real relationships of life are moral and spiritual, not merely physical; to teach him that, is to safeguard his future home, as well as his own character. Which will best give this point of view to the child—to emphasize Jesus' relation to God on the basis of physical life, or on the basis of spiritual likeness and union with the Father? I do not see how there can be more than the one answer to such a question.

It has been my good fortune to know two families in which no blood-tie existed between a parent and a child, but in which the spiritual tie was exceptionally strong and deep. In one case a woman, who had several children by birth, and one stepdaughter, said to me: "No one of my children has loved me as has this one whom people call not my own." In the other case the child has no blood-tie with father or mother, but has been adopted into the home. Yet I know few young men whose relationship is so truly filial as is his. His mother has for him an affection as strong as that for her own children. Shall we say that in such cases these are not really the children of these parents? Is not such a view putting altogether too much emphasis on physical elements, and too little on spiritual? And, most of all, with children, shall we not seek to emphasize always the inner relationships as the most real, lasting, and important? And can we do this, if we are saying to them that the mainstay of our faith in Jesus as Son of God lies in the story of a physical relationship at his birth?

Even for those who consider the story of the virgin-birth an established historical fact, I believe the right course in teaching children is that suggested above—to ignore it largely or wholly, leaving the question to be faced in maturity, when faith in the divinity of Jesus has been already won. Certainly upon those who hold that the infancy stories are in a state of comparative uncertainty there rests a solemn obligation so to present them as to make of them for the future, not stumbling-blocks, but foundation-stones for faith and character.